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Russia brands exiled former Moscow chief rabbi a 'foreign agent'

Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt, who served as chief rabbi for some 30 years and left Russia two weeks after it invaded Ukraine, says he's 'proud to be on the right side of history'

By **TOI STAFF** and **AP**
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Chief Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt poses for media while rabbis from across Europe attend the 32nd General Convention in Munich, Germany, May 30, 2022. (AP Photo/Matthias Schrader)

Russia has branded the former chief rabbi of Moscow a "foreign agent," over a year after he left Russia following its invasion of Ukraine. He subsequently called on Russian Jews to flee the country, warning that they may become scapegoats for hardships brought on by the sputtering war.

Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt was one of several individuals and entities added to the foreign agents list on Friday by the Russian Justice Ministry. It included a musician, two journalists, a former Moscow city official, and a non-profit educational organization.

The "foreign agent" label brings additional government scrutiny and also carries a strong pejorative connotation in the country. Authorities have used the law to discredit those listed and to stifle dissent.

Goldschmidt left Moscow in March 2022, two weeks after Russia invaded Ukraine, after refusing to support the war, and resigned a few months later. He had served as chief rabbi of Moscow for some 30 years.

"Pressure was put on community leaders to support the war, and I refused to do so," he told Britain's The Guardian in December. "I resigned because to continue as chief rabbi of Moscow would be a problem for the community because of the repressive measures taken against dissidents."

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The Russian Justice Ministry said Goldschmidt was included on the list for disseminating "false information about the decisions taken by public authorities of the Russian Federation and their policies," according to a report by Interfax, and for opposing the "special military operation" in Ukraine — the term Russia uses to describe the war.

Goldschmidt, who has served as the head of the Conference of European Rabbis since 2011, said in a response quoted by Maariv and Ynet that he was "proud to be on the right side of history and to join the list of people opposing this terrible war that has cost the lives of hundreds of thousands."

"This is the first time since the beginning of the war that a religious leader has been declared a foreign agent and described by the Russian government as a hostile threat," he was quoted as saying.

"It's very likely that this will mean the start of a new antisemitic campaign against the Jewish community in Russia. I've previously called on the local Jewish community to leave the country before it's too late."

Goldschmidt said that for 30 years he "nurtured and protected Moscow's Jewish community, and no decision will prevent me from continuing to do so."

Since launching its war on Ukraine in February of last year, Russia has added a number of people and organizations to the list, including the World Wildlife Fund, a conservation group with projects throughout the world, including in Russia.

Last week, Russian authorities declared the fund to be an "undesirable organization," effectively banning it from operating in the country. The global organization, which promotes wildlife preservation and works to reduce human impact on the environment, encourages activities that are "a cover for the implementation of projects that pose security threats in the economic sphere," the Russian prosecutor-general's office said, according to Russian news reports.

In his January interview with the Guardian, Goldschmidt warned: "When we look back over Russian history, whenever the political system was in danger you saw the government trying to redirect the anger and discontent of the masses towards the Jewish community. We saw this in tsarist times and at the end of the Stalinist regime."

"We're seeing rising antisemitism while Russia is going back to a new kind of Soviet Union, and step by step the iron curtain is coming down again. This is why I believe the best option for Russian Jews is to leave," he said.

Last October, Goldschmidt encouraged Russian Jews to flee the country after a Moscow official labeled the Chabad Hasidic sect a supremacist cult.

Since July 2022, Russia and Israel have been engaged in a legal dispute over Moscow's attempts to shutter the Russian branch of the Jewish Agency, a quasi-governmental organization that promotes immigration of Jews to Israel.

According to Goldschmidt, since the beginning of the invasion in March 2022, 25 to 30 percent of Jews in Russia have left or are planning to leave.

Other rabbis in Russia, including the country's chief rabbi, Berel Lazar, and his top spokesperson Boruch Gorin, have remained in the country after expressing concerns about the war.

Lazar and Gorin belong to a Chabad-affiliated group, the Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia, that has long enjoyed strong ties to Russian President Vladimir Putin. The group gained ascendency over all other Jewish organizations in Russia in the early 2000s, helped by the land and funding it received from the Russian government.

Born in Switzerland and not affiliated with Chabad, Goldschmidt had a rockier relationship with Russian authorities.

JTA contributed to this report.

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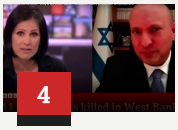

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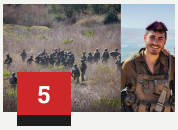

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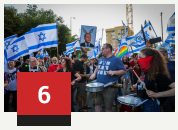

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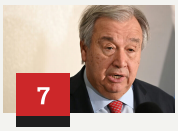

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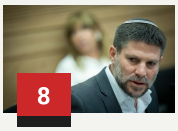

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